MARCH TO MAY

by

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ABSTRACT

March to May is a photographic exploration of spatial and temporal dislocations evident in television coverage of the official Iraq War – March 20th 2003, when the bombing of Baghdad commenced, to the May 1st declaration of victory by George Bush. Sourced from a viewing of over two hundred hours of archived television footage, each photographic image manifests as a durational record of approximately five seconds of selected real-time video segments of the televisual event. The extended exposures lend themselves to visual abstraction and, by extension, to political obfuscation - a purposeful disavowal whose intent is the denial of a place of purchase.

This piece works within the interstitial of space and time. It lies between the real-space of war, with human bodies, machines and geography, and the dematerialization of those elements into the televisual spectacle - between the real-time of war and the hyper-fluidity of satellite transmission.

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INTRODUCTION

This essay deals with spatial, temporal, aesthetic and political problematics encountered in relation to my art practice, specifically manifesting in my graduation project, *March to May*. I have contained these problematics within the rubric of "the interstitial," here defined as "existing between." I will investigate this between-ness in relation to the dislocation of space and time in current philosophical and artistic discourse, my use of media (understood here both as being televisual and artistic media), the historical place of political art and aesthetics, and my situation as a citizen, media consumer and artist – all of which exist as significant constructs in my current work.

The formal construction of this essay invokes a historical framework. I begin by creating a historical context for my current practice, move through the creation and production stages of *March to May*, comment on what happened during the exhibition of the piece in October 2004, and conclude by examining the strategies of Gerhard Richter in two of his contemporary works, *October 18, 1977* and *War Cut*. It is hoped that the structuring of this essay as historical document coincides with my real concerns for maintaining a space for history in our contemporary world.

A HISTORY

Prior to attending the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design I did an undergraduate degree at the University of Guelph, with a major in International Development and a minor in Theatre. The focus of the major was the history and political economy of colonialism, neo-colonialism and decolonialization. Had I followed the prescribed route I would have probably ended up managing development projects in what were then called Third World countries. As it was, I had a realization that the problems visited upon these nations largely originated in the Western world, and as such, I decided that the non-exotic choice was to stay in Canada and attempt to effect social change from here. What followed from that was three years of working within the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector as the director of the B.C. Environment and Development Working Group, whose mandate was to link the Canadian government's federal environmental policies to exported development initiatives in so-called Third World countries. The Earth Summit in Brazil in June 1992 was the historical moment that turned me back towards the arts. The Board of Directors, numbering eleven, and I (as director) were preparing an NGO policy statement on Canadian Forest Practices to be delivered in Rio de Janeiro. Twelve apparently intelligent, committed and creative people spent days haggling over word usage in a position paper that many in the room felt would do nothing to reverse the environmental, economic and political trends of the day. I was struck by the huge discrepancies between energy input and expected result. The ratio had to change. I resigned from my position and enrolled at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design (ECCAD) in September of 1992.

I have included the above history as it is important to an understanding of how and why I work as an artist. Mine is an attempt to balance a political preoccupation with concerns for personal agency in that process.

The art world that I entered in the early 1990s was raucous with political art. Post-modernism was in its productive heyday as far as institutional practice goes. I was immediately exposed to variants of the political as issue-specific activist art, collaborative practice, gender-, race- and class-based works, the pre-eminence of text, didacticism, extra-institutional performance, and the anti-aesthetic.

A lot of the undergraduate work that I produced while at the ECCAD were direct explorations into what constituted political art - as will be seen - with a focus on historical moments. *Rad Chic* (1993) was a text and photo-based poster that was plastered in public spaces around the city of Vancouver. The poster purported that the Jimmy Pattison Group had formed a subsidiary of its billboard subsidiary (Pattison Outdoor) that offered to create a radical past for adults who had missed the opportunity in their youth. Using digital technology, the company would, for a price, photoshop your image in front of (running away from) a late-1970s-era billboard that had inscribed upon it, a "hastily scrawled message of rage and non-conformity." Depicted in this poster was an image of a billboard that was both defaced and photographed by myself.

Another work, untitled, completed in 1994, was a collaborative performance and photographic piece that involved affixing photocopied images of buildings in the process of being torn down or, in one case, blown up, onto the structures that had taken their places in downtown Vancouver. The pattern that emerged was that the older buildings,

that had been destroyed, were examples of locally owned businesses and the newer, replacement buildings were multinationals.

A piece that was included in *The Spectacular State: Fascism and the Modern Imagination*, in a group show at the Fotobase Gallery in 1995, titled *In Your Face (In Your Name),* was a video, re-photography and performance piece about the mass arrest at Clayoquot Sound. The piece was presented as three video loops shown on three stacked televisions, the imagery consisted of an imbroglio of still and moving projections of newspaper articles, mass arrest television footage, and stock market ticker tape projected over pieces of my disarticulated body. It investigated the role of the citizen in democratic society and government and judicial complicity with corporations in British Columbia.

My graduating project from ECCAD, *Interred,* 1995, was a series of five colour photographs of the then recently closed wing of the Riverview mental asylum in New Westminster. I broke into that space and photographed what remained after government cutbacks had made it economically unfeasible to keep the wing open. The work was complicated by the fact that a Hollywood film crew had only recently used the building as a set. So whether what was reproduced in the photographs were the remains of the psychiatric or ofvthe film industry was unclear, and I left it purposely so. The completed images were slightly blurred, referencing the urgency I felt in being someone who was somewhere where I wasn't supposed to be. As well, my intent was to make comment on the quality of memory, both in terms of the psychiatric industry and the people it serves and prevailing societal attitudes towards people housed in institutions such as these. The photographs were all realized in a cold super-saturated blue. Public response to them was that I was beautifying what was so patently not.

There is a distinct through-line to the work produced at Emily Carr. It was issue-based work primarily concerned with specific historical moments. All of the work included some aspect of renegade performance – defacing billboards, postering the city with purported Jimmy Pattison ads, adhering violent images to buildings and breaking into an abandoned mental asylum. As well, most of the earlier pieces, and principally important for this essay, *Rad Chic*, and the piece that involved adhering photocopied images onto buildings, were direct acknowledgements of political art that embraced an anti-aesthetic. The posters in *Rad Chic* were text heavy and were cheaply mass-produced. The archival images of the buildings being destroyed were black and white photocopies, serially produced, and then hastily and haphazardly affixed using flour paste. Looking at these early works today, I can clearly see that they are derivative. I am quick to forgive myself for producing them because, although derivative, they were a part of an exploratory process that ultimately led to a maturation of my work. This maturation, principally, involved the then very unpopular idea of recuperating the complicated and troubling notion of the aesthetic in political art, and, very importantly for me, a purposeful employment of the aesthetic.

It was the investigation of the dialectic between aesthetics and politics that led me to the MFA program here at Simon Fraser University. The piece I created for my first year project was a photographic sculpture of a wedding dress, titled *(Ad)dress*. The process of creating the piece included purchasing a late 1980s-era wedding gown, ripping out all the stitches and then photographing the resulting separate pieces. The images were digitized and the Kodak watermark was ghosted over the entirety of each piece. The enlargements were printed and then stripped of their paper substrate, so that I was left with the plastic

emulsion which acted as a taffeta-like material. I resewed the pieces of emulsion, added crinoline as sub-structural support, and displayed the work on a dressmaker's dummy.

There were two reasons why it was important to me that the dress was made and presumably worn in the late 1980s. The primary referent was that the 1980s was a decade of decadence and the beginning of the contemporary slide towards right-wing economic and political orthodoxies. In effect, I was asking the viewer to think about where that slide had landed us, here, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. As well, the work harkened back to important political art done at that time by feminists in relation to the exposition of gender politics. I was well aware that "dress work" had had its moment when I made this piece, but I was dissatisfied about the level of comment made, by artists working in this mode, about the insinuation of the corporate into notions of gender and more importantly for me, private space. The wedding dress is one of the most culturally coded forms. It is rife with symbolic concepts of femininity, economics and tradition, and yet it is one of the only clothing forms that had not yet felt the brush of the Nike swoop.

When viewers entered the Bartlett Space at SFU where the sculpture was displayed, they saw something that was uncannily sturdy, not unlike highly polished or even wet marble. The frailty of the form was not evident until closer inspection revealed that its surface was constructed of emulsion and thread. Along with the perception of the intimate details of photographic lace and buttons was the reveal of the Kodak watermark. This watermark was printed at the same density as the repeated logo on the back of Kodak

prints[1] referencing the actual and also luring the viewer into three distinct stages of reveal - it is a highly reflective marble-like sculpture, it is a fragile photographic piece, and ultimately, it is engaged politically with corporate control over private space.

In keeping with concerns about corporate incursions into private space, my original proposal for my graduation project was to create a half-hour video piece of an apartment building at night. The idea was to organize a chosen building's inhabitants to extinguish all their apartment lights and watch the same television situation comedy at the same time. The video would have been recorded from outside the building at such a distance as to frame the entire structure's synchronized glowing and flickering – the light show itself reminiscent of television footage of the visual display of dropping bombs. The video, to be called *Everybody Loves Raymond,* was to be a silent and contained apocalypse. The piece engendered questions about contemporary isolation, the consumption of mass culture as collective experience, the quality of that experience, and the spectacle of television and urban architecture. Importantly, the work was to be saturated with the ephemeral luminosity of television blue. Then the Iraq War began.

I was transfixed.

[1] In the process of creating this piece I discovered that the density of the watermark was such that it could not be reproduced in any way. A talk with a Kodak representative revealed that this was done purposely for the protection of their logo. So in making the dress, the font and wording had to be created from scratch. And yes, I did get permission to use it. As a further aside, it is impossible for me to recreate the dress's watermark in documentation, so an essential part of the piece can never be shown to potential galleries.

MARCH TO MAY

> The occupation is by the media. We are occupied by teletechnologies and we must be part of the resistance.
>
> *Paul Virilio*

March to May is a series of eight colour "durational" photographs of selected televised video news coverage of the Iraq War. These images were taken from an archive[2] of approximately two hundred hours of cable television footage, recorded between March 20th and May 1st, 2003 (those dates being the initiation of hostilities and the declaration of victory).

The photographs were originated on a 4x5 view camera set up in a completely darkened room in front of a 30" colour television. The only light source was from the screen of the television set itself. The film used was 160ASA (the highest speed available in this format). The reason for the darkened space and high-speed emulsion was to prolong the exposure for as long as possible. The average exposures were between three to seven seconds per image - hence, durational. The final images are individual shots of the three to seven seconds of moving video footage.

The process of the piece entailed viewing the entire televisual archive and making a duplicate VHS tape of images of interest. The original VHS archive was sourced from various cable television networks, including, but not limited to, American channels such as CNN, ABC, CBS, Fox and CNBC, and the Canadian network, the CBC. In the spirit

[2] The archive was created by a friend who recorded (and as of this writing, still is recording) the event 24 hours a day.

of the recently noted phenomenon of channel surfing or "grazing", the creator of this archive switched between numerous stations, sometimes as often as five times in one hour. This footage then, acted as a necessarily fractured zeitgeist of North American network coverage of the unfolding events, as captured by one consumer of this media.

FAST FORWARD

In keeping with the notion of the fractured and introducing the concept of time compression, I purposely moved through the archival tapes in fast forward mode. First, I was not interested in using images that included the seemingly omnipresent cutouts and tickers that littered the screens (and actually obstructed the visual transfer of the newsworthy event). My intention was to focus solely on the visual spectacle of the coverage. The durational photographs were meant to exist in both visual and textual non-specificity. Notably, the only static visual information on television news programs are the network identifiers. My cursory research into this archive showed that to avoid images with network identifiers would immediately remove 75% of the coverage from possible inclusion in this project. Hence, the fast forward scanning of the archive was partly practical.

However, it was also conceptually grounded. As an artist, I am committed to creating a through-line between my initial inspiration, the process and the piece. To me, the time leading up to the war was a nonsensical riot of ungrounded causation, an inexorable hurtling-toward, panic-in-the-face-of. The news imagery and attendant analysis from March 20th on continued in this destabilized and surreal vein. There was nowhere to hold purchase. The fast forward scanning of the archive was thus an act of recall or more

precisely, an embodiment of the sensation of deluge. While viewers of the finished piece were not necessarily aware of this process, the final imagery should evince this - being durational and, hence, ungrounded in terms of ready or specific referent.

The third and final reason for the fast forward scan-through is significant in terms of the aesthetic and formalist concerns of the piece. The heightened pace of visual transfer and the reality that it took many days to move through the material produced a narcosis, the aim of which was to fundamentally alter or subsume my conceptual perception of that which was presented. I wanted to be inundated, bored and awash in imagery so that I might first respond to it on a completely formal level – movement, colour, shape and texture. I wanted to register what stood out from the morass, trusting only the link between saccadic movement and initial response – this night-vision movement towards what appears to be a corpse, that light-burst over Baghdad...and so on. Obviously, then, this privileged the aesthetic of the imagery. The work needed be considered ethereal to be successful. There is a method to my madness founded in a belief that the process and the output will inform each other.

THE INTERSTITIAL: TIME, SPACE AND THE BODY

Advanced by French philosopher Paul Virilio, *delocalization* extends the endeavours of artists and critics working with and thinking about deconstruction in art. As he states, " we have gone from spatial dislocation - in abstractionism and cubism - to the temporal dislocation that is now underway."[3] The obvious referent for this tendency in contemporary thinking is telecommunications technology with "its live transmission,

[3] Paul Virilio and Catherine David, "The Dark Spot ofArt," *Documenta Documents 1*, (Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1996), 47.

global time and near instantaneous intercommunication."[4] Another French thinker, Michel Foucault, believed that the present epoch will be, perhaps above all, the epoch of space. "(W)e are in the epoch of simultaneity, ...juxtaposition, ...the near and the far, ... the side-by-side, ... the dispersed."[5] Whereas Virilio's concept tends toward the absolute dispersal of objects within the delocalized, Foucault, less drastically, does not envision a spatial void, but rather a deconstruction of hierarchical space into "a set of relations that delineates sites – heterogeneous spaces which are irreducible to one another and not superimposable on one another."[6] Interestingly enough, for this writer, is that while both theorists are dealing specifically with the breakdown of distinctly separate notions of time and space, the historically constructed binary nonetheless infects their discourse; seemingly, for these writers, it is difficult to delocalize without bringing in elements of space and to despatialize without commenting on time. The difficulty of a complete bifurcation will be seen in this essay. I, too, find myself slipping between both concepts, attempting to use one to explain the other.

March to May takes up these ideas of space and time, but underscores them within what I have called the "interstitial". Virilio believes that since delocalization is nowhere, "art can (also) be nowhere. Existing only in the emission and reception of a signal."[7] (Note his use of the spatial to discuss what he has labeled a deconstruction of time.) I flirt with utter dematerialization, albeit in a very material way, ultimately questioning the totalization, but not the spirit, of Virilio's words.

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Politics-Poetics Documenta X – The Book*, eds. Francoise Joly, Cornelia Barth and Brian Holmes (Germany: Cantz Verlag, 1997), 262.
[6] Ibid., 264-5.
[7] Virilio and David, 47.

Addressing Virilio's idea that contemporary art is derealized, or existing nowhere, this work then is ultimately, and perhaps ironically a grounding of that concept in the materiality of photography, importantly in this instance, analogue photography. Compounding the interstitial aspects of this notion of material/immaterial is the fact that I am sourcing my imagery from transmitted digital video that, itself, because of the downsizing of news gathering staff and field journalists, has been grabbed from a small pool of video news feeds "usually controlled by larger media corporations"[8] and broadcast in that ambivalent space of the television screen. Yet my final piece ended up as a "weighty object", with a preponderance of black, framed and hung on a gallery wall.

Historically, photography, besides having to fight for a place as art (largely championed by Stieglitz), has also been seen, in terms of traditional artistic practice, as the least material of the plastic arts. Even in my comments above, the "thereness" of the work is delimited in terms of its formal presentation – the visual override of black and the frame. Roland Barthes, in his book, *Camera Lucida*, uses these descriptions in his attempt to work through the essence of photography - "a weightless, transparent envelope...vaguely constituted...an emanation."[9] Add the idea that photography is considered to be a trace of the object, and that it is, in the end, substrated only by paper, one then fully grasps its precarious objectness.

Many contemporary artists concerned with the "dominance of the market in all fields of cultural production,"[10] have been playing with the notion of derealizing or de-

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[8] Timothy Druckrey, "Instability and Dispersion," *Overexposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squiers (New York: The New Press, 1999), 97.
[9] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: The Noonday Press, 1981), 5, 19, 88.
[10] Jin-me Yoon, *MFA Graduate Seminar Handout*, unpublished manuscript, 1.

materializing art practices, ultimately daring the art market to commodify that which isn't there. While I think that this process has concrete antecedents in the work of the avant-gardes (of the 1930s and, later, of the 1960s) and performance art in the 1970s, the current direction towards de-objectification is even more ephemeral, as two of its implicit directives have been to move outside of the gallery system and to create work that is primarily concerned with what has been labeled "relational" qualities. While work within what Nicolas Bourriaud has termed "relational aesthetics"[11] is by no means the only direction in contemporary art practice, it is a significant phenomenon and, as such, it ironically (considering the above delineated history of photography) posits photo-based work much further down the scale towards a "bound" or material medium, a place traditionally occupied by the more plastic arts. This is a situation that would have been unthinkable to early theorists of photography. Virilio further states that there is art still being created that works against dislocation and delocalization; however, he summarily dismisses these works as holdouts. "The plastic arts are finished, it's over, *alles fertig*, I'm not joking!"[12] Catherine David, curator of *Documenta X*, who was interviewing Virilio at the time when he made this statement, rejoins with, "(y)ou're saying that to someone in charge of a major exhibition!" [13]

In relation to Virilio's "get with the program" imperative, I view my continuing use of photography as an intrinsically political stance. In much the same spirit as Jeff Wall calls for "a renewed engagement of visual art with problems of presentation, realistic representation and iconographic meaning which had been relegated to the background by

[11] Nicolas Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2002).
[12] Virilio and David, 54.
[13] Ibid.

abstract art,"[14] I maintain that working with the materialized in the age of the dematerial is not simply the posturing of a pouty photographic artist concerned with her own relevancy. Rather, it is a purposeful opposition to current economic and political trends of economic speculation, floating capital and deterritorialization – movements that leave the citizen/consumer destabilized. So, rather than flow along in the same veins of "late capitalism," I would much prefer to clog those arteries. Having written that, it will be seen in this essay that my role as contrarian is not cut and dried. It may seem at times that I engage and deny at random. However, I feel that the seemingly haphazard selectivity of my process is anything but.

The concept of television poses serious challenges to notions of the spatially fixed. Primarily, of course, is the idea that technical media, like television, " has become so inextricably woven into the fabric of everyday life...that (it) can no longer be considered 'media' at all, in the old sense of occupying a neutral space between humanity and the world."[15] Ignoring, for the moment, a political reading of the word neutral (a reading which was never that author's intention), media is normally seen as embodied to the extent that it is neither humanity nor the world, but both at the same time. Continuing this spatial dissolution, another contemporary writer states that television "materializes in a relatively immaterial manner."[16] Because I am dealing with the relatively slippery concept of the interstitial, it seems important here to also acknowledge the semantic conflation in the use of the word "television". For television is not only that which is

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[14] Peter Burger, "On a Critique of the Neo-Avantgarde," *Jeff Wall Photographs* (Koln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig, 2003), 174.
[15] Christopher Phillips, "Desiring Machines: Notes on Commodity, Celebrity and Death in the Early Works of Andy Warhol," *Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document* (New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1994), 42.
[16] Samuel Weber quoted in Anna McCarthy, "From Screen to Site: Television's Material Culture and its Place," *October* 98 (Fall 2001), 93.

shown, but also an object. So, to reintegrate the above thoughts, television exists in an integrated non-neutral space of the material and immaterial that is contained within the limits of a three-dimensional cube that is found in a distinct place in your own home. Whew. *March to May* attempts to acknowledge this complexity in part by framing the material that is immaterialized within the real space of the border of the television set – this border being the recessed black frame in older television sets that separates the broadcast image from the larger console. It was important to me that the work be realized in the same dimensions as the war was broadcast on television. The television set that I worked with was a 30" set whose dimensions were 18" x 24". The images in *March to May* likewise, are 18" x 24". I wanted to remain as true as possible (in terms of size) to the war as broadcast, for the purpose of commenting on the extreme miniaturization of world events within the televisual screen and the flattening of four dimensions to three.

My purposeful disavowal of network referent in the piece is a further complication of ideas of space and place in television. Foucault's concept of heterogeneous or relational space is defined as "series, trees, or grids."[17] In this sense, television's definitive spatial form is the network. "Networks are difficult spatial phenomena to grasp because they exist on more than one scale; even a long network remains local at all points,"[18] hence, neither local nor global, but both at the same time. Much contemporary writing on media is quick to posit that with the globalization of televisual media, the appropriate framework within which to view this phenomenon is, likewise, global. However, even a cursory knowledge of the way networks actually operate presents this totalization as an

[17] Foucault, 263.
[18] McCarthy. 94.

overt simplification of what is, in reality, a very complex system. My avoidance of station identification is an attempt to draw attention to a contemporary understanding that it does not matter which agency is carrying the broadcast, as they have all largely become homogenous in their political interpretation (lack of critique) vis. the Iraq War.[19] Even if Al-Jazeera Television is on the scene recording and inscribing the visuals, that information, when transferred, loses the original commentary and is reinscribed at end point for different political ends.

However, there is a distinct problematic in my exclusion of station identifiers. In doing so, the images that are the final outcome of my process become situated in an originating void. When this is coupled with the fact that the durational aspect of re-recording the televised video footage as single photograph results in a blurring of the visual referent, questions of this artist's complicity with the destabilization and inundation of media consumers (and viewers of this piece) are necessarily fore-fronted. Questions of origination of footage in relation to the American military's almost absolute control of who is in or out of the "media pool" (embedded journalists, government and corporate censorship of what is ultimately used and intra-network politics) are seemingly swept away. These, of course, are very important issues and in fact, often it is these issues that receive the most currency in alternative or academic discourse in relation to the visual framing of the Iraq War. However, I am convinced that most people are conversant in the facts of military censorship and the increasing hegemony of corporate ownership of North American media. My slippery intention is to insert myself into the undifferentiated morass to draw attention to its undifferentiation. Jean Baudrillard himself posits this as a

[19] See any number of books on this topic. One I highly recommend is Danny Schechter, *Media Wars: News at a Time of Terror* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

credible way of working. In an interview with *la Sept* in 1988, he said that "the artist needs to work with the mediated system of electronic and reproducible images, albeit with an ironic strategy, play with the media, accept the deed of this system, ... perhaps not disrupt it, yet make it reversible."[20] On the other hand, Bennett Simpson, curator of and writer on contemporary art, contends that, "insofar as art turns increasingly to commercial and spectacle culture for strategies, materials and subject matter, it manifests, whether positively or negatively, the mythologies of its day."[21] Hence, this work is collaborationist (sidling up to media) or part of the resistance (sidling up to media), depending on claims to irony or whose words you throw your weight behind. Even then, these two thinkers, as quoted above, are not necessarily or even clearly oppositional. I present their words as cautionary, hopefully illuminating the difficult place/non-place that I find myself in.

THE NEWS COMMENTARY

Bridging problematics of spatial and temporal dislocation, I turn now to the use of news commentary in the work. During the exposures of the durational photographs, my original intention was to record the accompanying commentary. Those individual recordings were to be transposed to text, ultimately serving as titles for each of the images. Cursory tests showed that these 'titles' were going to be complete sentences bordered on both sides by fragments of sentences, two or three overlapped voices, or even different languages. Often they did not seem to refer to the Iraq War at all.

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[20] Jean Baudrillard, "The Work of Art in the Electronic Age," *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings In and Around American Art Since 1945*, ed. Paul F. Fabozzi (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), 484.
[21] Bennett Simpson, "Specific Spectacles: Art and Entertainment," *Artext* 71 (November/January 2001-2), 71.

There were three elements at play. One is the transfer from that which is heard to that which is read. The second is the removal of the human interface from communication, and the third is the use of the fragmentary. The translation of voice to text would eliminate emotionality, flatten inflection and accent, and deny the fact of more than one speaker – all things which serve to ground a voice or voices in a specific context. The aim of all three concepts was to critically extend the visual abstraction of the images themselves, in a post-structuralist framework: if a whole sentence was indeterminate in its meaning, then sentences bordered by sentence fragments would only heighten that ambiguity. The fragmentary nature of the texts was to be indicative of the fact that sentences used by newscasters are actually quite short, not even lasting seven seconds (the longest duration of the exposures). One would think that shorter sentences or thoughts are more concise or more transparent, however, from my early explorations, it seemed that the opposite was true: shorter aural segments and complex political ideas are not natural bedfellows. My proposed use of text was supposed to heighten this paradox of concision and obfuscation, ultimately questioning the value of news as informing media while acknowledging the underlying political aims of maintaining an uninformed populace.

As it turned out, the commentary beneath the images I finally selected (eight out of the one hundred and fifty four that were first chosen) did not coalesce with the above stated intention. Of the eight sound bites, three had specific references to geographical locations readily identifiable with the conflict – "demilitarized zone between Kuwait and Iraq", "Nasiriyah hospital", "the border between Kuwait and Iraq", and three others used words directly associated with war – "prisoners of war", "vehement fights", "no pause in

the fighting". In only two cases was I able to take the commentary from the image as broadcast. As the text was always meant to be secondary to the imagery, I realized that I would have to create a different framework within which to incorporate text into the work. To this end I played the entire duplicate VHS with my back to the screen. I wrote down all of the segments of commentary that made no reference at all to the war, or had a poetic turn to the phrasing. This approach resulted in a list that included "it sucks being over here", "just listen", "perfect love casts out fear", and "for nothing, for nothing", amongst others. This list also included the other six segments that I ended up choosing as titles. Whereas I was unable through the choice of imager, to remain true to notions of the fragmentary as that which was spoken *with* the original televisual imagery, I was able to salvage some semblance of my idea by broadening the parameters of the verbal pool.

TEMPORAL DISLOCATION

Issues of temporal dislocation or delocation are also paramount in *March to May*. The first place it is encountered is in my use of a video archive. An archive, by definition, is a record of something that has already passed, that is, in effect, historical. It is here that the complications begin. It used to be that the notion of history was "historical", implying that a length of time had passed in which events could be looked at as having happened a long time ago, somewhere in the distant past. This is no longer the case. Virilio makes reference to this speeding up of time.

> This means virtualization in its very essence: the virtualization of actions *as they occur* and not just simply of *what was*, to recall Barthes' idea... What is coming into play today is no longer relative velocity, but absolute

> velocity. We're running up against the time barrier. Virtuality is the electromagnetic speed that brings us to the limits of acceleration.[22]

History is keeping pace with this virtual velocity. Witness to this is the fact that "*within weeks* of the end of hostilities, Time Warner produced a CD-ROM disk on Desert Storm...in their publicity, describ(ing) this interactive multimedia disk as a first draft of history."[23](my italics) In essence, instant history will soon be biting our asses, unless we hurry to keep ahead. Fredric Jameson's imperative to always historicize is seen in a different light through the lens of Virilio's terminal velocity. If history is only yesterday, then we are all historians.

A precipitous compression of time is also found in other places in *March to May*. The two hundred hours of archived footage is a modest grab of the actual tens of thousands of potential network coverage hours. I further this compression drastically by the choice of no more than fifty-six seconds of video that are ultimately presented in eight photographs. The end point of all of this is eight images. While photographs are mortal entities, they do effectively freeze the passage of time. Issues of the advocation of artistic agency are forefronted in this, jumping into what is a seemingly endless stream of visual transfer, selecting and ultimately isolating and stopping heretofore indistinct, incessantly repeated or trivial moments in this technological flow.

Contrary to this, and included in *March to May*, is the acknowledgement that the "smallest unit of meaning (and therefore of value) in television is the frame, defined as a complete scanning cycle of the electron beam, which occurs every 1/30 second."[24]

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[22] Virilio and David, 47.
[23] Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3.
[24] Bruce Cumings. *War and Television*, (London: Verso, 1992), 24.

Without two complete scans, there is no image. The time it takes for the image to fully come to realization is 1/60 of a second, which importantly, is not unlike photography's characteristic time of exposure. Given this insight into television technology, the images in the work, each being approximately two hundred and ten complete scans of the electron beam, act to precipitously expand these base units of meaning, mimicking my use of durationality in the creation of the photographs. The significance of these expansions lies in the idea that "nonstop imagery (television, streaming video, film) is our surround, but when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite." [25] It is my hope that the expansion and compression of time in *March to May* is seen as a gesture of the inability to embody both the quantitative enormity and the details therein, of what is being transmitted.

The compression of time has further consequences for our ability to ground ourselves. The tendency of instantaneous transmission is to obliterate any real sense of relational space. As Foucault says, "heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time."[26] Iraq is 12,000 km away from the continental United States. (There is a ten-hour differential between where I situate myself as viewer and that which is viewed in Baghdad.) "Real-time" coverage and the hyper-fluidity of transmission convolute this temporal and spatial distance. Again, we inhabit the interstitial. The fact is that the satellite transmissions clearly demarcate the space between the hyper-instant and plodding real time *at the same moment.* I sit in an

[25] Susan Sontag. *Regarding The Pain of Others*, (New York: Farrah, Strous and Giroux, 2003), 22.
[26] Foucault, 269.

evening setting and watch sunrise sorties over minarets. Whole days seem to either disappear or outlive their natural finitude. What day is it there? When did this particular assault take place...yesterday? Today? Tomorrow? It slips into the surreal. If it is a bombing attack that takes place tomorrow how is it possible since I am inhabiting the now that is not tomorrow. Is this a prescient bombing? "The heterotopia (heterochronies) are capable of juxtaposing in a single real place (time) several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."[27](my parenthesis added) Politically, this is a transparent strategy, not one that was necessarily conspiratorially pre-envisioned, but one which, because of the reality of space and time differentials between site of hostilities and site of reception, nicely serves the purposes of a military industry that wants to remain unencumbered by a grounded and knowing nation of viewers.

Beyond problematics with the compression of time is the question of the framing of the Iraq War in a passage of "real time". Both the working title of the piece, *March to May*, and the self-imposed parameter of my "research" from March 20th to May 1st, provide exact reference points from which to view the Iraq War. Effectively, I am towing the party line that the war began and the war is now over. It is a purposeful gesture, intended to make comment on the mythologizing of this conflict – this war will go down in history in fabricated parentheses. The reality is something quite different, pointing to a necessity of questioning the definition of modern warfare.

[27] Ibid., 268.

SPACE, TIME AND WARFARE

Most of Virilio's writings on detemporalization and despatialization have been given over to a redefinition of contemporary warfare. The compression of the actual time of fighting war is a reality according to Virilio; "we have lived through a more and more pronounced shortening of conflicts from several years to a few days."[28] *March to May* confirms this quickening through its use of reference material spanning the entirety of the official war, waged and won in forty-two days. The overwhelming conclusion that Virilio draws in his publications about conflict is that military technological innovation is directly responsible for western society's arrival at the limits of time. Satellite technology and its instantaneous feed is the offspring of an American military imperative to expand the quality and quantity of its wartime surveillance capabilities. In situ gathering of information about enemy maneuvers and installations in the Gulf War was achieved through the use of nose-cone cameras and night vision cameras, whose visions were relayed to C^3I,[29] control centre for the war situated in the basement of the Pentagon back in Washington. There decisions were made and transferred immediately back to the originary site. Contemporary warfare is no longer about the earth, sea or perceived sky, but instead "where we find the satellites, that is the fourth front."[30]. Those who hold the power of instantaneous transmission effectively hold the power - a critique that is furthered in the writing of Jean Baudrillard.

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[28] Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archaeology*, trans. George Collins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 21.
[29] Paul Virilio, *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*, trans. Michael Degener (London: Continuum, 2002), 27.
[30] Ibid., 3.

Prior to reading Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, I had assumed that it was premised on the idea that the war, being fought and broadcast in a virtual milieu, could not be considered a real war. What I discovered was that, while Baudrillard does continue his thoughts on the hyperreal, his book, like his title, largely states that the Gulf War was not a war. "Wars are usually waged between adversaries. In this war there were huge discrepancies with regard to military technology and method – direct engagement rarely took place. It was a one-sided conflict, an exercise in domination rather than an act of war."[31] The Second Gulf War (Iraq War), fought in much the same way, only deviated from domination in as much as now there is occupation. Perhaps I have out-ironied the master of irony: Baudrillard's title "tells it like it is" whereas mine "tells it like it isn't." I contend that the economic injunctions and embargoes that temporally link the first and second war (1991 and 2003) should also be considered part of the Western wartime strategy. Indeed, more civilians died during this interstitial than did in both wars combined. This war, then, is not an event, as indicated by the title of my piece or the fact of the setting of definitive parameters in my scanning of the archive.

Over a third of the originally selected images were given over to newscasters and a litany of experts. It was natural to assume that at least one would find its way into the final work. Through the process of editing it became apparent that the experts and newscasters would not be in attendance. However, of the eight final images, six do include a human referent ("Certainly not this day," "And with that we will take your questions", "The rescue", "A formal consideration", "Reaction is pointedly neutral", "It was quiet then this"). In relation to delocalization, Paul Virilio claims, "the last thing that resists is the

[31] Baudrillard, 17.

body."[32] In the spirit of the interstitial, this work manifested these bodies in varying degrees, as ghostly emanations, commenting on the distantiation at work between the actual and televisual Wars, my transference between media, and photography's primary status as referent. In effect, I am drawing attention to the inability of viewers to find purchase in any realm within the broadcast, even in the recognition or appearance of the human form.

Finally, the largest and perhaps most obvious problematic is seen in the grounding of my inquiry into space and time from within the construct of the Iraq War. As has been seen in this essay, the spirit of my inquiry is largely placed in a disavowal of both the visual and aural referent of this event, which begs the question of Why the Iraq War? If the manifestation of the images and text is diffusion and impenetrability, why concretize this obfuscation in a real event? To this end I again return to the idea of the interstitial. The interstitial by its very nature cannot lay claim to a position of either/or. Perhaps this is an unusual position for a citizen and artist who wants *March to May* to be ultimately read as a politically charged piece about the Iraq War. However, it is my belief that this work, fore-fronting abstraction and tenets of the pictorial, does work to political ends. It does not do so in a declarative manner, but in one more nuanced – a position that is indicative of the spatial and temporal complexities of both television and the televisual event. It is my hope that this proposed piece will be perceived as critically engaging the convoluted tensions of place/non-place, surface/depth, real/hyperreal, truth/lies, and the struggle to perceive space and time in this contemporary world of the global in all of its immediacy.

[32] Virilio and David, 50.

THE INTERSTITIAL: PHOTOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

Unlike the more traditional arts, and here I am thinking primarily of painting and sculpture, there is a wide gulf between the process and result in the creation of this photographic body of work, one that was significantly full of the unknown. To say that I courted the unknown is an understatement. It was a conscious attempt to play with the strictures acknowledged as an intrinsic part of mechanical and digital reproduction. Analogue colour photography, as was used in *March to May,* has an unavoidable element of *in absentia* – the negatives were sent away for chemical processing and enlargement and the revelation of the work, when completed, was immediate. The significance of the reveal was compounded, in this case, by the element of chance found in the exposing of the negatives. The only real constants in the act of making exposures was that the film was of the same speed and stock and that the camera was set up in a fixed relationship to the television set. The video footage varied dramatically in terms of both quality and density of image. Extensive bracketing was required as there was always a four to six stop differential between meter readings and proper exposures on test Polaroids. (Subsequent talks with other photographers revealed that it is notoriously difficult to get correct readings from television light.) The moment to open and close the shutter on the camera was decided by me using visual or aural clues on the video stream (e.g. newscaster says "storm" and the image cuts after a pause, the camera pans to the left and zooms in on dog, when dog's tail comes into focus, etc...). The imprecision of this was furthered by my own counting of the seconds, which most assuredly was not always at the same rate. As well, constant playback of the duplicate tape brought in video glitches that varied each time the segment was shown; the trick was to make the exposure on the

playback that did not have this disturbance. Many negatives were immediately discarded and of the bracketed negatives that did get developed and contacted, there was substantial difference between the singular imagery in terms of density and what was actually captured. As well, there was a significant colour shift between what was shown on the television screen and the contact sheets. Why this happened I have never been able to explain.

What was not revealed at the contact stage was the moiré pattern that is present in all of the images. When I received the first test prints I was shocked to see a fluid line pattern over the entirety of the image. Not knowing what it was, I could only characterize it as reminiscent of a 1960s psychedelia. I checked both the negatives and the contact sheets with a loupe to discern whether or not the pattern was imbedded in the negative. Under this slight magnification, it did not seem to be. Further research uncovered two possibilities – either they were Newton's rings or a moiré pattern. Newton's rings are created when convex and flat glass are sandwiched together and moiré results when translucent materials with repetitive lines are overlapped. As I did not discern either of these in the negatives, I could only assume that they resulted from the process of scanning the images for photoshop work. However, a discussion with the technician at the photographic lab revealed that the pattern was moiré, was in the negative and was a result of shooting from a television screen. It was an integral part of my imagery – the photographic version of the ghost in the machine.

When the time came to finally print selected imagery I worked with a photoshop technician who, after hours trying, informed me that the network logos, evident in the majority of the images, could not be removed. Given the layers of visual texture –

television grid, moiré patterns, abstracted imagery that resulted in ghosting - and the fact that all of these elements would have to be aligned to produce a quality print, compounded with the idea that he made his living this way, I chose to believe him. This resulted in a complete change in the intentionality of the piece, one that I was prepared to address within the confines of this essay. When the work was shown in the gallery in October, the network identifiers were in evidence. In December of this year, addressing the logistics of writing a publishable thesis, I was informed that I had to have copyright clearance from the television stations in order to have the thesis with copies of the images accepted by the library. The images themselves, taken directly from television, had been qualitatively changed to the point where they were not a direct appropriation, but could be defined as being "based on" the original footage and, as such, did not need copyright clearance. The reality of acquiring such permission from five television networks, whose logos were implicated in a damning critique seemed insurmountable, and so I approached a professional photographic outlet to discern whether or not they could remove the logos from the images. Their technician was successful and the work has been reprinted to coincide with the original intention as explicated in this essay. This is the work that will be seen at my defense, offered to galleries, and memorialized in the record of my time at the University. It is an understatement that this has complicated the place of this essay and the original exhibition of the work. Nonetheless, I have included this important discussion here to acknowledge both the difficulties of incorporating a digital component to the work - my knowledge of which was limited enough to have to trust a technician in the first place - and the reality of institutional practice.

THE INTERSITIAL: AESTHETIC LURE

Contemporary political artists have eschewed the place of beauty in their work for a number of sound reasons. Primary among these is the debacle of art as commodity that started to bear full fruit in the early to mid 1980s. But the history is engaged from the inception of beauty as far back as the 18th century, with those roots receding even further still. The common understanding of an integrated artistic aesthetic begins with Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Reason*, which posits a theory of art as "pleasing without subserving any interest...pleas(ing) without concepts."[33] Importantly as well are the notions that an understanding of what is pleasing, or aesthetic judgment, is a universal and that it is based on the perception of beauty as being harmonious (or seeming like nature).[34] I do not intend here to write an essay within an essay about Kant's conception of the aesthetic (his words have spawned a veritable industry of academic rhetoric), but I include it here for the express purpose of seeking a source for so much of contemporary art's discomfort with the notion of the beautiful. In the descriptors that I have provided, by way of one of beauty's contemporary champions, Arthur C. Danto, it is clear why political artists have not found it a compelling ally. It expressly negates an ideological imperative in art (though it is an ideology itself,) and it elevates art to a rarified place of contemplating its harmonious forms, outside of the world unfolding. Incorporating an aesthetic imperative into *March to May*, whose concept is the disharmony of war, and whose form is largely the disharmony of abstraction, seems an unlikely proposition. As will be seen, my

[33] In Arthur C. Danto's "Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 186.
[34] Ibid.

intention is strategic, daring both myself and others to engage with the history of the aesthetic.

The first time that I ran across the idea of the aesthetic as strategy, was in Suzanne Perling Hudson's article *Beauty and the Status of Contemporary Criticism* (2003).[35] In this article, the author regards the recent preponderance of writing about beauty or creating "beautiful art" and dismisses it as largely regressive or unexamined in relation to contemporary concerns. However, she also concludes that there is a possibility for recuperating the aesthetic, one that lies within the intentionality of the artist working with political content, specifically in the acts of "infiltration" or "lure". Infiltration specifically addresses post-Mapplethorpe institutional exhibition of "hot topic" art while the lure operates at the level of the singular viewer and their negotiation of the content. Importantly, that negotiation should not be easy; "beauty becomes political at the determinate moment when the credibility of 'beauty' as a value or quality is brought into question, forcing the critic or viewer into a difficult confrontation with – and an altogether uncertain relation before – the contradictory work at issue."[36] It is my contention that *March to May* confronts and unsettles in precisely this manner, using formal constructs of colour saturation, framing and the abstract and pictorial manifestations of durational exposure.

Images of war are images of violence. They run the gamut from landscapes of aftermath to moments of death. *March to May* is the surround of death. Iraq is its geographical place. The landscapes are deserts being moved through or battled on; tanks, guns, barbed

[35] In *October* 104 (Spring 2003), 115-130.
[36] Ibid., 124.

wire and aircraft deployed in the sand; troops, technicians and prisoners of war leave their momentary footprints. There are no dead bodies. They did not exist on the videotape.

The dead are a recent inclusion in the photographic record of our catastrophic inclinations. "Portrait(s) of absence, of death without the dead"[37] was the legacy of early war photography. The dead only became evident as technological innovation lightened the load of the erstwhile-encumbered chronicler of war. *March to May* acknowledges this early history while implicitly questioning the reincorporated absence. The official line is a gesture of respect for the families of the dead[38] (our dead). Implied in this is that it does not make for good television. What does make for good television then?

In viewing the original archive, an off-camera voice made this comment about the framing of a video segment: "(t)hat's great television Alec, you had the battlefield commander with smoke in the background. Fine television, sir." Seemingly, formal construction of the visual was a concern not only for the programmers of the war, but also the videographers who make their living providing the content. But beyond issues of camera angle lies the pointed seduction of the absence of the mangled, dead human body. The taintless battlefield is political. Beyond platitudes of sensitivity to still-living family members, it is an avoidance of the Vietnam effect and a celebration of technological military evolution with its smart bombs and surgical strikes. Significantly, the bloodless war is grasped only in the totality of this packaged spectacle. *March to May* acknowledges this aestheticization while questioning the legitimacy of doing so.

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[37] Sontag, 50.
[38] Eleanor Hearntey, "A War and Its Images," *Art in America* 92, no.9 (October 2004), 52.

Photography's history is rife with dialectic: of nature/of culture, science/art, real/not real, document/work of visual art, etc. It is interesting to me that these binaries so easily fall to the wayside when considering a photography whose subject is war. It is almost as if there were no alternative to the photograph but to document; as if to say, this is what you are good at doing, so do it. "For the photography of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance. Pictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don't have the look that comes from being 'properly' lighted and composed."[39]

March to May operates in the interstitial of art form and document. It engages with the history of the photograph as document through the fact of its realization as photograph, but denies photograph as document through its manifestation as pictorial and abstract. Ultimately, I want this work to be understood as engaging with *the histories* of photography as they have played out in the history of art - mid-Victorian Pictorialism, experimental photography of the early 20th century, the detournement of the Situationists, and mid-20th century Abstraction. The dichotomy of photographic engagement is also evidenced in the fact that I turned to the Iraq War as subject precisely because I wanted to make a record of that historical moment, to bear witness to it as an occurrence. My agency in this bearing witness is founded on my consideration of the war's construction and the manifestation of an aesthetic that I think corresponds to that construct. I want people to question photography's role in the creation of our visual record of history, ultimately suggesting that even without a formalized and pointedly historical treatment it is still a heavily packaged construct.

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[39] Sontag, 26.

Tension between content and form also plays out in the indeterminate relationship between viewer and image. The aesthetic lure operates to different ends, depending on where the singular viewer positions themselves on the continuum between revulsion and attraction to images of war, their avowal of comfort as to this placement, and contemporary notions of viewer fatigue.

Susan Sontag, in her recent book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, writes:

> At the beginning of modernity, it may have been easier to acknowledge that there exists an innate tropism toward the gruesome. Edmund Burke observed that people like to look at images of suffering. "I am convinced we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others," he wrote in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful.* (1757) "There is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity."[40]

I have included this passage here to point out two ideas. The first is that Sontag, a contemporary writer and thinker on the photographic, although acknowledging post-modern disavowals of such trenchant universalisms, does not herself discredit Burke's stance. And secondly, that beauty and suffering have a significant historical relationship, at least, in the mind of one important thinker on the subject. My understanding of the viewer's relationship with visions of the Iraq War is predicated on discussions with my contemporaries. What I have discovered is that response seems conditioned by specific life experience. Some admit to a Burkean world-view, some deny it, some define their engagement as being intrinsically related to what is depicted, and still others maintain they have been so inundated with apocalypse that they don't know anymore. Given this, the aesthetic lure cannot be said to operate in one or another way. My original intention

[40] Ibid., 97.

was that it be seen to repudiate violence through foreshortening the space between the aesthetic and the catastrophic, but this would only be so if you are one who categorically turns away from such visions. Perhaps, and this is the difficulty of the piece, it is seen to reinforce the idea that there is no space between beauty and horror, and that instead, they endow each other.

OCTOBER 12

Due to various constraints, fellow MFA student, Christine Stewart and I decided to do a two-person show[41] and approached all of the galleries in the Lower Mainland to facilitate our graduation work in a timely fashion. The Curator of the Helen Pitt Gallery, Jeremy Todd responded and was able to schedule a show for five days between regular gallery programming. October 12th was the date of the opening.

It is an interesting phenomenon of the artistic practice that the work does not fully reveal that which is knowable until the moment that it is presented or performed for the public. Such was definitely the case with *March to May*. The piece was hung on two adjoining walls with ample white space between each of the images. The main title of the body of the work was sequestered on a wall that was slightly separated from the work itself. The overall effect was of a very formal gallery presentation that heightened the individual pieces as stand-alone objects of contemplation.

The original intention was to place the separate titles with their corresponding image. However, my attempt to do so was disappointing. The vinyl lettering did not behave as title but as an integrated textual element of the image. Given my concerns with abstraction, I decided to open up both the physical and connotational space between word and image by placing the titles on the same wall as *March to May*, descending in order of their appearance on the wall -

[41] Despite obvious differences in our work, we felt that there was enough commonality in the separate pieces to suggest a through-line in the proposed two-person show. This was primarily seen in the breakdown of narrative, the subjective nature of truth, sourcing and manifesting video, and artistic agency in relation to received information and randomness in output.

Certainly not this day
And with that we will take your questions
Stages of seriousness
The rescue
A formal consideration
Reaction is pointedly neutral
It was quiet then this
Operation James after Bond

While it was apparent to me that the words were the titles of the pieces, the general consensus was that people initially perceived them as poetry, and specifically as a poem that quickly broke down in internal logic or meter. It was confusing and destabilizing. The titles, as discussed earlier in this essay, were chosen to enhance the abstraction through a singular relationship with the image. With indirect placement I had inadvertently extended the speculative space between these elements. Perhaps it is no surprise that I was thrilled with this reading - a reading that, quite frankly, I did not foresee.

The saturated colour of some of the images, along with the transmounted lustre coating that framed the work made for a piece that literally jumped off the walls and was readily apparent from a great distance outside the gallery. The lustre intensified the colour, gave the appearance of wetness and had a highly reflective surface. It was almost lurid. At the opening many people commented on the visual draw and its uneasy relationship to subject matter. Some expressed that they felt tainted or, in two cases, even horrified by the affective space between the initial reception of formal concerns and the reveal of war imagery. The reflective surface was also charged with implicating the viewer in the work, ultimately mirroring not only the viewer's body but also the gallery space within

the frame. An overt critique of institutional practice was not imbedded in *March to May*, but was a welcome reading, nonetheless.

The moiré pattern came under intense scrutiny at the opening and none were more surprised than I when what I had considered an unavoidable inclusion was perceived as the fingerprint of the artist. Bless the engaged viewer. The truth was that I was so involved in the process of creating this work that I did not have the perceptual distance to create such a reading: a reading that is felicitous and now so patently obvious.

OCTOBER 18, 1977

A large influence in this work is seen, not in the oeuvre of an artist or group of artists but in one piece by German painter, Gerhard Richter. As will be seen, the influence is not always an easy convergence. The piece in question is Richter's cycle of photo-based paintings (or what he himself calls photo-paintings) (Buchloh, 89) entitled *October 18, 1977.*[42] The fifteen paintings in this piece, completed in 1988, centre on the sudden deaths, by murder or suicide, of three members of the Baader-Meinhof Group while incarcerated in the Stammheim Prison in Stuttgart, but the series also includes images of the earlier death of Ulrike Meinhof, the arrest of Holger Klaus Meins and the funeral of Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Jan-Carl Raspe, the three who died in the early hours of October 18th. The Baader-Meinhof Group were a large group of young, left-wing German radicals who were collectively and individually responsible for bombings, kidnappings and deaths in the German variant of youth revolt in the late 1960s and 1970s – examples being, on the one hand, the comparatively benign student uprisings in Paris, and on the other, The Weathermen and the Symbionese Liberation Army in the United States, the Italian Red Brigades, the Palestinian Black September, and a bit later, the Squamish Five here in British Columbia.

The fifteen paintings are all based on photographs that Richter had collected over the years. These particular images were sourced from two distinct agencies - newspapers and

[42] Richter is well known for his brightly coloured abstract paintings and, given that some of the images in *March to May* are almost precisely that, albeit photographic, it is perhaps a bit unusual that I do not make reference to them as having influenced my work. There are two reasons for this. The first being that I was largely unfamiliar with Richter's oeuvre and only saw the abstract work after my initial encounter with the October series compelled me to continue research into Richter. Secondly, despite the common adjectives of "brightly coloured" and "abstract" I feel that his concerns with creating work in this vein do not significantly coincide with my intentions.

police records. Richter reworked these photographs realistically in gradients of black and white oils and pulled the surface of the wet paint with a squeegee, resulting in what is recognized as the "Richter blur". While some of the images are stand-alones of events ("Hanged" and "Funeral"), portraiture ("Youth Portrait"), "establishing shot" ("Cell") or still-life ("Record Player"), the great majority of the cycle was completed in serial format ("Arrest I, II", "Dead I, II, III", "Confrontation I, II, III", "Man Shot Down I, II"). While I have the misfortune to have only seen these works in reproduction, these reproductions struck me as stunningly beautiful and resonate with deep sadness. I believe that my initial response was not atypical. What was interesting was my discomfort with these perceptions, encapsulated as a high modernist apprehension of a politically determined subject matter. Given my incursions into aesthetics and politics, I was immediately interested in the work, what he and others were saying about this charged dialectic, and for this essay, potential convergence with my own project.

While both *March to May* and Richter's *War Cut* (a piece published just this year) deal with historically specific and very political subject matter (war in Iraq 2003), Richter maintains he was neither declaiming nor memorializing the Baader-Meinhof Group in the *October 18, 1977* work. This declaration of neutrality flies in the face of what and how it is perceived. Richter's oft-professed aversion to the radical actions of this militant left-wing group was informed by having lived under fascist and communist regimes. As well, Richter's early training in art was at the East German Dresden Art Academy, whose curriculum was founded on Russian Socialist Realism.[43] His is a lived denial of ideology in art. The problem of my being inspired by the *October* cycle is found not only

[43] Robert Storr, *Gerhard Richter: Doubt and Belief in Painting* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2003). 34.

in this refusal, but also in the corollary of his distinctly modernist belief in universals. As Richter stated, "(d)eath and suffering have always been an artistic theme. Basically it is *the* theme." [44] In framing his work in this manner Richter is daring the viewing public and contemporary art critics to renegotiate a postmodern discourse that negates the validity of working with such a prescription. Richter is a contrarian. Witness to this is that even his abstract paintings which directly acknowledge Abstract Expressionism are, foremost, a critique of that historical moment.

Images in *March to May* are wholly sourced from mediated imagery and Richter's are, in part, as well. However, the rationale for use of source materials are distinctly related to the time of our separate practices. Richter's history of painting from photographs is firmly entrenched in the 1960s flourishing use of vernacular source material. Influenced by both Lichtenstein and Warhol, Richter began working with photographic sources primarily as a release from the notion of the authentic inner expression of the visionary artist-genius.[45] My rationale for the use of mediated imagery is that the televisual vernacular is too pervasive to be ignored, especially in relation to our reception and framing of events that happen elsewhere.

Both of these works engage with media transference. Richter paints from photographs, while I photograph from television broadcast video, manifesting in that which is hopefully perceived as photographs that have painterly qualities. *October 18, 1977* and *March to May* not only take up issues with the specific histories of those separate media but importantly the discursive space between them and two attempts to reduce the differential.

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[44] Ibid., 241.
[45] Ibid., 51.

As is well known, the invention of photography was supposed to have sounded the death-knell for painting. The ensuing histories of the mediums were a negotiation of what were deemed essential characteristics - photography the representational, factual, and immaterial, and painting the negation of those elements. The evolution was anything but linear. Pictorial and experimental photography are antecedents of *March to May* as is the great body of painting known as History Painting. Richter's work contests the photograph's assumption of the mantle of representing history, while I question why photography was given that job in the first place:

> we are not dealing with documentary photography and we are not dealing with documentary painting either. Instead, we are confronted with a continuum of representations stretched taut between the abstract concepts of photography and painting, each of which, by asserting its own conventional reality implicitly questions the conventions and the truth of the other.[46]

Through their different uses of photography, both works arouse certainties only to dispel them.

Although Richter does not use video in his work, motion and time are implied in the piece through the pulling of the wet paint and in the serially produced "Confrontation I, II and III." Video's graininess is nowhere evident although newspaper photographs are notoriously so. Delineated above are three of the four definitives of video – motion/time and grain or, in digital video, pixelation. *March to May* relies on these characteristics, along with extended exposures, to create the illusion of pictorialism that is evidenced in much of the imagery. Photographic technological innovation has been predicated on reducing grain structure in the image. *March to May* embraces and extends poor

[46] Storr, 244.

resolution by the use of digital video source footage, often shot under severe environmental conditions that was broadcast, recorded and then re-recorded on analogue tapes, with the final dub run through the video playback machine at least five hundred times. The qualitative breakdown of the image is seen in chroma noise, and the undifferentiated layers of pixelation and grain, none of which were removed when the images were digitized to remove text. The duration, which dissolved the instantaneity of the photograph into the fluidity of video, softened the pixels and grain, producing what I have called pictorial abstractions.

The blurring in both works operate on different levels. They both reference the quality of memory, the passing of time, and complicate the idea of photography's access to truth. How and what we remember seems more pointed in the *October* series due to Richter's having created the work at a remove from the event, whereas I am historicizing something that is still unfolding. The quantitative difference is in the flow of information around the separate historical moments; the activities of the Baader-Meinhof Group were never subjected to analysis on 24-hour news channels for months on end. My feeling is that, in terms of memory or recall, the historical immediacy of the Iraq War is negated by this inundation.

Painting, which takes time to make, has that time embedded in its representation. Richter brings the durational quality of the process literally to the surface of this work, suggesting its opposite through the blur. Photography is typically understood to be about the instantaneous, the world revealed in precise fractions of a second. *March to May* inscribes its opposite through the blur, asking the viewer to intensify their efforts to understand, reinstating contemplation over immediate apprehension in that process.

Susan Buck-Morss, professor of political philosophy and social theory at Cornell University states that,

> by what we do every day – or don't do – we make our world. We are implicated *without any malice of intent.* The "we" referred to here are all of us who succeed one way or another within the system... If the system is the problem, the enemy is within. It is a part of ourselves. We know this, we sense it in our bones.[47](italics added)

The challenge of these works is in this lived evasion. Sourcing from media outlets as well, as in Richter's case, police files, is the most obvious example of this. Our histories are disseminated and codified through reception of media - significant in how things are framed and how quickly they disappear. Engagement with the formal constructs of high modernism is another tactic. The aesthetic realm, art for art's sake, is, in recent tradition, a place that is retreated to in order to avoid contact with this world. Both of these works challenge this evasion, colonizing the aesthetic realm with their separate visions of the catastrophic.

[47] Susan Buck-Morss, "What is Political Art?" *Private Time in Public Space: Insite97* (San Diego and Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 1997), 20.

WAR CUT

Richter's most recent work, published in Germany in May 2004, is a book called *War Cut.* It includes two-hundred and sixteen photographic details of an earlier abstract painting, *No. 648 – 2*, accompanied by an equal number of articles taken from the German newspaper, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, on March 20 and 21, 2003; as the reader is well aware by now, the opening days of the Iraq War. The book was published in German so I am not privy to how the newspaper editorialized the event. Despite this, I am quite interested in Richter's use of received text. The main source for Richter's thoughts on this work comes from a recent interview with freelance curator and editor of the German cultural magazine, Kulturjournal, Jan Thorn-Prikker. In that interview Richter stated that, "(e)ven the facts in the newspaper articles somehow become unrealistic in this context. I removed the headlines and bylines from the articles. I respect the writers. But I like to think that maybe by removing the headlines I contributed toward having these texts read as literature."[48] As stated earlier, the text in *March to May* was largely perceived as a strangely composed poem. Richter's arrival at text as literature, disavowal of reality, was pre-meditated, whereas mine was realized through the process of attempting to place the titles next to the images and concluding that they were too direct – in effect, closing down what I had opened up with visual abstraction.

Questions of the much-touted dialectic between formalism and political content are also fore-fronted in *War Cut.* Thorn-Prikker tells Richter "(w)hen people hear you say that

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[48] Jan Thorn-Prikker, "A Picture is Worth 216 Newspaper Articles," *New York Times* July 4, 2004, Arts and Leisure Section, 26.

form is the most important aspect [in this work], that could easily be understood as meaning that you are unconcerned about the politics or the human cost of war."[49] Richter's response is a vehement denial, "No, no. In this case the facts are so overpowering, the contents so crucial, the form is also the more significant. We need it simply to deal with the subject matter...Form is all we have to help us cope with fundamentally chaotic facts and assaults."[50] I have been repeatedly asked whether the soft abstractions or the political content are pre-eminent in *March to May*. I believe they exist in an uneasy, perhaps even unresolved, reciprocal relationship. The content gives the abstraction its significance and the reason for the abstraction is decidedly found in the content and its specific topicality.

Richter's form is, of course, a further abstraction of his abstract painting, recreated here in this book in two hundred and sixteen (!) details of that larger work, complicating the idea of what exactly it is that we are holding onto in the face of the fundamentally chaotic. Apparently Thorn-Prikker would not agree with this sentiment. In the photographed details of the painting, he sees concrete objects, aerial photographs, oil fields on fire, pools of oil, blood, ghosts, death heads and hideous faces. Opaquely, Richter neither confirms nor denies this reading, stating only that some of the images work to "match the cruelty and the madness described in the text shockingly well. And others *can* serve as illustrations when the texts speaks *(sic)* of deserts and other landscapes."[51] (my italics) Obviously Richter is content to let the work operate on the level of abstraction or received feeling.

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[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 26 and 27.
[51] Ibid., 27.

Most viewers of *March to May* responded to the varying degrees of abstraction contained within the separate images by either wanting to know exactly what was being depicted or, like Thorn-Prikker, telling others near them what they saw. It seemed important to do so. My initial thoughts were that people were wont to respond to artistic abstraction in this manner and also that in this instance this engagement was compounded by the fact that the work was photographic and hence, evidentiary. In essence, they had been trained by the ethos of photography to ask of it the referent. But if the work was strong, that strength relied largely on a negotiation of the space between representation and abstraction. In this regard, their inquiries and declarations were to be expected and even demanded by the work, for two primary reasons. First, the levels of abstraction varied – on one end were the relatively accessible death head images of the moving soldiers and, on the other, the completely obscured rescue of Jessica Lynch. Why have variance if not to suggest that the unknowable might offer itself up under scrutiny? (The converse of this, of course, is that perhaps the knowable is anything but.) The second rationale is that the work, both in media choice and content, references war photography. That history, beginning with the Crimean War, has, with technological innovation, followed a relatively straight line towards documentary reportage. War photography is a straight photography that, whatever its political mandate, plays out in public space as evidence or bearing witness.

POSTSCRIPT

During the process of defending my thesis and project it became obvious to me, through questions and discussion, that *March to May*'s indeterminacy was its critical strength. An example of this was the ability of one of the examiners to endow some of the pieces in the work as conceptually and formally engaged with, or more precisely, engaged as the early history of war photography – something that would not have happened had the specificity of the content been pre-eminent.

The space of the interstitial in this work was also recognized and commented upon, specifically in relation to Foucault's discussion of the heterotopic. As can be recalled, I write about the heterotopic in this essay as the space between the war, its broadcast and the television set. What came out at the defence was the idea that the photographs in *March to May* are themselves, heterotopias. It was noted that although I have called the project a "photographic investigation" the photograph is not the ascendant element in the work. According to one examiner, it was almost not in evidence at all. In essence, because I had photographed what had already been shot as video, I was telescoping the viewer of the piece into a direct visual (and cognitive) relationship with the war. This immediacy and the "invisibility" of the act of my having photographed the broadcasts, effectively denies my role as interlocutor. Thus the photograph becomes the heterotopia – it is neither here nor there, it does not draw attention to itself as a photograph (which is the typical posturing of any photography of war), and it incorporates another distinct

space (that of the video footage of the war) within its own space, and in the process of doing so, almost subsuming its own presence.

Thus the advantage of not only presenting work for public consumption, but doing so within the rigorous framework of institutional practice. A reading such as the one delineated above might have been lost to me, if not for the process of defending this work before people whose primary occupation is to think about the visual. I look at *March to May* in a different light now. It is clear to me that the pieces in the work still exist as isolated moments held in a plastic frame. I will continue to call them photographic. But, there is a large difference between the photograph as object and the photograph as discourse. Perhaps this is what was meant by another examiner, who said that *March to May* was evidence of a meta-photographic practice. This reading of photography/not photography dovetails nicely with my concerns about inhabiting the interstitial. However, this reading also raises larger and more complicated questions: how should we approach photography in what seems to be an increasingly violent world? And, more importantly, how can the photograph approach that violence in such a way as to have any meaning? It is beyond the scope of this work or this paper to suggest anything with certainty – the interstitial, after all, is ultimately a place of questioning.

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